Karl Marx and British Socialism
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§ 1

When Harold Wilson famously remarked that British socialism 'owed far more to Methodism than to Marx' (1964: 1), he was articulating a widely-shared view. That presumed lack of connection between the work of Karl Marx and what Wilson called 'distinctly British ideas and British traditions' is one of the things I seek to challenge here.

There are many conceptual and historical connections between Marx's writings on the one hand, and politics and culture in nineteenth-century Britain on the other. However, these connections are neither widely recognised nor well understood. In particular, there is a pervasive tendency to treat Marx's thought as a predominantly continental creation with a limited and largely posthumous impact on British society. In what follows, I say something about that posthumous impact, but concentrate on some neglected evidence of Marx's links with British politics and culture during his lifetime.

(Note that I occasionally use the writings of Friedrich Engels – both works that he co-authored with Marx and some that he wrote alone – to illuminate my subject, but I do so, unless otherwise noted, only where it is plausible to assume a broad affinity between his views and those of Marx. In addition, I use the term 'Marx*ian*' to refer to those views shared by Marx and Engels, and not, for instance, to refer to the views of later Marx*ists*.)

§ 2

Marx's adult life can be told as the story of three 'exiles'. He was born and grew up in Germany but his adulthood was spent in Paris, Brussels, and London, respectively. The last of these three exiles was by far the longest, with Marx having his family home in London from late 1849 until his death in 1883; living first in cramped rooms in Soho, moving later to larger accommodation in Kentish Town, and finding a final resting place in Highgate Cemetery (Briggs and Callow 2008). Contemporary London provided both a secure haven for political refugees and a superb vantage-point from which to observe and engage with the most advanced capitalist society of the day (Ashton 1986: ch. 3). Yet many traditional accounts of Marx's intellectual development leave little or no room for his work to have been influenced by, or to have impacted upon, British politics and culture during his lifetime. Two examples can be given here.

According to what might be called the 'continental' account, Marx's intellectual development was seemingly unmarked by the accident of his geographical location in Britain. A version of this view can be found in Isaiah Berlin's well-known *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, which portrays Marx's intellectual formation as a wholly continental product. Building on the philosophical foundations established during his university years in Prussia, Marx's 'final intellectual transformation' is said to have taken place in Paris, in the early 1840s, when he was still in his twenties (Berlin 1948:

80). Marx subsequently moved to London, but his links with British intellectual and political life are portrayed as always weak and those of an outsider. He is described as having few acquaintances amongst the native population, and knowing the country only superficially. His social milieu seemingly consisted entirely of German émigré communities, and his political energies had an overwhelmingly continental focus (combating French and Russian anarchism, and building socialism in Germany). Indeed, despite living in Britain for well over thirty years, Marx is said to have 'remained almost totally unaffected by his surroundings, living encased in his own, largely German, world' (Berlin 1948: 17).

According to what might be called the 'communist' account, the continental picture of Marx's intellectual development needs modest revision. Whilst it accurately captures the philosophical and political dimensions of his work, the continental account underestimates the influence of British authors in providing the starting point of Marx's economic theory. The communist account finds a canonical formulation in Lenin's schematic sketch 'The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism'. Marx is portrayed as building on the comparative intellectual advantages (in different areas of knowledge) found in three countries in what was then the most developed region of the world. His genius brought into a 'comprehensive and harmonious' synthesis three national intellectual traditions which were previously isolated from one another: German philosophy (Hegel, of course, above all), French socialism, and British political economy (Lenin 1963: 23). On this communist account, the influence of Britain is acknowledged, but it remains a modest one, limited to the researches into political economy that Marx conducted in the British Museum. In *Capital*, Marx is said to have 'continued' the work of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and others; providing, in particular, a more consistent formulation and 'proof' of the labour theory of value (Lenin 1963: 25).

§ 3

One does not need to know much about Marx's third exile in order to be suspicious of these traditional pictures of him: either, as an insular German thinker wholly unaffected by British intellectual life; or, as primarily a continental philosopher and revolutionary whose economic theory nonetheless reflects a modest British influence (since it starts from the work of Smith, Ricardo, and others).

Even the more generous of these traditional accounts misunderstands the one British connection that it does allow. The impact of the political economy of Smith, Ricardo, and others, on Marx's economic thought is widely and rightly seen as significant. However, the influence of this British – more accurately, largely Scottish – contribution extends beyond the more technical aspects of Marxian economics to impact on both Marx's sociology and his theory of history. The writings of Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, and (perhaps especially) John Millar, have plausibly been identified as a probable influence on Marx's historical and sociological theories (Pascal 1938; Meek 1967). Such claims provoked a sceptical response from critics concerned with the proper interpretation of these earlier writers, and, in particular, their view of the relation between the 'mode of subsistence' – that defines the four successive stages of hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce – and the political and social arrangements that they are associated with (Skinner 1982; Haakonssen 1989: 225-226). However, the claim that

this tradition of historical sociology provides part of the intellectual context in which Marx developed his theory of history, does not require us to elide (anachronistically) the differences between the Scottish 'mode of subsistence' and the Marxian 'mode of production'. Moreover, the historical connections here look reasonably straightforward. Marx read widely amongst these authors – making notes on Millar's *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* in 1852 – and his earliest attempts at a theory of history explicitly credit these Scottish thinkers as being amongst the first to have given the study of history 'a materialistic basis' by writing histories of 'civil society, of commerce and industry' (Marx and Engels 1976b: 42).

The more serious problem with both these traditional accounts is their failure to recognise that the impact of British politics and culture on Marx's writings goes well beyond the often acknowledged, if not always well understood, influence of political economy. Indeed, there is scarcely room here to cover all of its dimensions. For example, I will not discuss the significant influence of British literary culture, beyond noting that anyone sampling his published and unpublished writings would soon discover Marx's evident familiarity with, and frequent utilization of, Defoe, Dickens, and especially Shakespeare, amongst other authors (see Prawer 1976). Nor will I pursue the complex influence of British political economy on Marx's thought beyond the remarks above. Instead, in what follows, I concentrate on some neglected evidence of Marx's sustained interest in, and engagement with, politics in Britain.

Even before moving to London, Marx had made connections with Chartism, both through Engels, who had written for the Chartist press when living in Manchester in the early 1840s, and through the Communist League, which had institutional links with the Fraternal Democrats. Marx's first speech to an audience of British workers – during his first visit to England in November 1847 – was at a meeting organised by the Fraternal Democrats to celebrate the anniversary of the 1830 Polish uprising, with the Chartist *Northern Star* (2 December 1847) reporting the remarks of 'the learned Dr Marx' in full. Marx saw Chartism as representing the politically most advanced section of the British working classes, and he maintained that, given the country's class structure, the realisation of their primarily 'democratic' demands would have far reaching 'socialistic' consequences (see 1979e). This understanding of Chartism as an early stage in the unfolding struggle for socialism – rather than as part of a longstanding battle against 'old corruption' (made increasingly redundant by an evolving mid-Victorian reformism) – has been criticised (Stedman Jones 1984). However, it is the existence of Marx's engagement, notwithstanding its possible limitations, which is pertinent here. Marx read widely amongst Chartist writings, and modern historians have found evidence of Chartist influence in his analysis of British politics (Taylor 1996: 238-240). Marx also published his own work in Chartist journals including *Notes to the People,* the *Red Republican*, and *The People's Paper*. The number of articles varies but, for example, in 1853 he published some 14 pieces in the *People's Paper*, including 8 about Palmerston (see below). Most significantly, the first English version of the *Communist Manifesto* appeared serially, throughout November 1850, in the *Red Republican,* in a little-known translation by the Chartist writer Helen Macfarlane (Black 2004). (Copies of this translation quickly became difficult to locate, and it was later eclipsed by the 'authorised' version produced by Engels and his Manchester friend Samuel Moore in 1888.) Marx knew Macfarlane and seems likely to have approved publication of her interesting version, although whether he had any further involvement in her translation is uncertain (Draper 1998: 28-30). *The Times* (2 September 1851) subsequently published two (unattributed)

excerpts from the Macfarlane translation in an article warning against the spread of cheap socialist literature 'containing the wildest and most anarchical doctrines'. Marx is also known to have attended Chartist demonstrations, including the mass protests of 24 June and 1 July 1855 against proposed restrictions on Sunday trading (Marx 1980a, 1980b). Lastly, Marx came to know many Chartist leaders personally. He was friends with Julian Harney, the leader of the so-called 'physical force' wing of the movement, until 1851, but his closest Chartist connection was with Ernest Jones, a man he respected and whose advice he sometimes solicited, including, on one occasion, about whether to sue *The Daily Telegraph* (Marx and Engels 1985: 33). When Jones died, Engels wrote to Marx suggesting that 'amongst the politicians, he was the only *educated* Englishman who was, *au fond*, completely on our side' (Marx and Engels 1988: 211). Others have been less certain about the depth of the intellectual agreement here; 'Marx's mate he may have been', writes one historian, 'a Marxist he was not' (Taylor 2003: 193).

Marx's engagement with British politics was also reflected in his often disregarded journalistic career, which included a decade-long association – between August 1852 and March 1862 – with the broadly progressive *New York Daily Tribune*, then the largest circulation newspaper in the world, with some 200,000 readers (Ledbetter 2007: xviii). Marx's *Tribune* articles have a complicated textual history; some early attributions of authorship are unreliable (the articles were typically unsigned), and there are issues about the extent to which some were rewritten (when used for editorials in particular). However, Marx wrote something like 372 articles himself, and a further 15 with Engels (who independently wrote another 147 articles which were submitted as if by Marx). Many of Marx's articles reappeared in the weekly and semi-weekly editions of the *Tribune*, and some were reprinted in Britain in the Chartist *People's Paper*. One of Marx's articles (1979d) was even mentioned in a parliamentary debate about stamp duty; praising the tone and utility of the American paper, the veteran free-trader John Bright surveyed the contents of one particular issue of the *Tribune*, noting the inclusion from Britain of 'an elaborate disquisition upon the Budget of the right hon. Gentleman [Gladstone – DL], which did him justice in some parts, but not in others, and which, so far as the Manchester school were concerned, certainly did them no justice whatever' (Hansard 1 July 1853). Marx's *Tribune* articles sought to explain British politics and society to a North American audience, and variously covered: high politics (general elections, parliamentary affairs, and the conduct of foreign policy); economic conditions (factory legislation, strikes, and economic crises); and wider social and cultural issues (capital punishment, class structure, and the role of the clergy). Marx has been criticised for exaggerating the seriousness, and likely political consequences, of contemporary economic crises, but his articles have also been credited with an acute perception of both the personalities of high politics, and the shifting character of parliamentary coalitions in Britain (Stedman Jones 1984: 125). They also confirm Marx's fierce appetite for current affairs, with his regular reading including: establishment dailies such as the *Times*, *Morning Herald* and *Morning Post*; liberal and radical weeklies like the *Examiner* and the *Economist*; and popular periodicals including *Reynolds' News* and *Punch*. Marx begrudged his financial dependence on this kind of work, and, more particularly, resented both the editorial interference with, and the amount he was paid for, these *Tribune* contributions (Marx and Engels 1983: 339). However, it would be a mistake to dismiss this journalism as either uninteresting, or unconnected with his more theoretical work. For example, one article developed a satirical contrast between the Duchess of Sutherland's charitable concern with

slavery in the American south (she had recently hosted a reception for Harriet Beecher Stowe) and her family's brutal record of expropriating land from the native 'Scotch-Gaelic population'. Marx estimates that Sutherland's transformation of 'clan property into private property' had resulted, between 1814 and 1820, in some 15,000 people being violently evicted in order to create grazing for 131,000 sheep (Marx 1979c: 487, 491-492). The Sutherland case later reappeared as part of the account of 'primitive accumulation' in *Capital*, where Marx (1987a: 720) gleefully referred to his earlier *Tribune* article and the mischief it had caused at the time. The language of these *Tribune* writings should also be noted. Initially, Marx's articles were translated from German by Engels and (less successfully) by Wilhelm Pieper. However, from February 1853 onwards, Marx felt confident enough in his developing linguistic skills to write the articles in English himself. Indeed, in December 1854 he warned the commissioning editor of the *Neue Oder-Zeitung* that, since his writing for publication for the best part of the last two years had been in English, 'German may give me some trouble at the start' (Marx and Engels 1983: 507).

One of the stranger threads in Marx's contemporary journalism requires separate consideration. Marx pursued a lengthy and determined campaign against Viscount Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister (Hutchinson 1969; Taylor 1996: 240-243). Marx saw Palmerston as combining a fiercely reactionary foreign policy (promoting Russian interests as a way of repressing progressive forces elsewhere in Europe), with a growing Caesarism in domestic affairs (shifting the previous constitutional balance in favour of personal power). These views brought Marx into contact with David Urquhart, a highly eccentric diplomat, independent MP, and writer whose life has proved irresistible to Marx biographers in search of 'colour'. Urquhart's own monomaniacal campaign against Palmerston was driven by a heady cocktail of Turcophilia, Russophobia, and conspiracy theory. Urquhart portrayed the whole British establishment – save, happily, the monarchy – as under malign Russian influence, but Palmerston, in particular, was identified as having a 'Russian soul', and, rather more concretely, as being in receipt of Tsarist bribes (Urquhart 1866). Marx used foreign policy and diplomatic material from Urquhart's publications, and more surprisingly – and, Marx would always insist, independently – came to agree that Palmerston was in the pay of Russian absolutism (Marx and Engels 1983: 395, 440). Endorsing this historically discredited charge was scarcely the high-point of Marx's journalistic career, but he did recognise that, Palmerston apart, Urquhart's views were 'diametrically opposed' to his own (Marx and Engels 1983: 455). Intellectually, Urquhart was a romantic reactionary, who condemned democracy, reduced history to diplomacy, sought to return to an idealised past, and saw conspiracy everywhere (Marx 1979b: 477). Marx joked that if he had shared Urquhart's wider views he would be tempted to identify the Cholera morbus, recently found in Newcastle, as despatched by the Czar 'with the "*secret mission*" to break down the last remnant of what is called the Anglo-Saxon spirit' (1979f: 326). Predictably, their one meeting was not a success (Marx and Engels 1983: 412-413). The textual history of Marx's anti-Palmerston writings is not without interest. At the time they were widely read; for example, parts of his 'Life of Palmerston' *Tribune* series appeared variously in the *People's Paper*, the *Glasgow Sentinel*, the *Sheffield Free Press*, and in Tucker's series of *Political Fly-Sheets* where they are said to have sold 15,000 copies (McLellan 1973: 265). Subsequently, however, their apparently Russophobic content led to their being omitted from, or marginalised within, certain Soviet editions of Marx's writings in the twentieth century. (For example, Marx's

Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century was excluded from the forty three volumes of the *Marx-Engels-Werke* even though its authenticity was not in doubt.)

It was Marx's association with 'the International' – the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) – that most secured his reputation in Britain during his lifetime. A contemporary magazine profile confirms that it is 'as one of the foremost organisers and directors of the "International Association" that his name is most familiar to the English newspaper reader' (Bax 1881: 349). Marx played little part in the founding of the International, but soon established a leading position within it as a result of his drafting skills, organisational abilities, knowledge of the European labour movement, and sense of purpose (Collins and Abramsky 1965). The IWMA was made up of five affiliate national groups (British, French, Italian, German, and Polish), and its history is often told in terms of Marx's evolving struggles with French anarchism (Pierre Joseph Proudhon and followers), in the period before the Brussels Congress, and with Russian anarchism (Mikhail Bakunin and followers), in the period between the Brussels and Hague Congresses. However, the International was more often preoccupied with issues that had a predominately domestic focus, including: free trade, the Irish Question, land nationalisation (the Land and Labour League included many IWMA members), the existence of a 'wages fund' (see below), the limitation of the working day, the place of strikes, and the use of child labour. The tendency to underestimate the British dimension of Marx's involvement with the International is often reinforced by somewhat exaggerated accounts of both the insularity of the British labour movement (which, after all, had a record of support for Italian independence, the North in the American Civil War, and the Polish insurrection of 1863), and the supposedly grudging character of Marx's support for trades unions and political reforms (which he actually saw as independently valuable and establishing vital 'elbow room' for further 'development and movement' (Marx and Engels 1985: 552)). Many of Marx's writings first appeared under the auspices of the International. The 1864 'Inaugural Address', written by Marx and aimed primarily at British workers, was published as a pamphlet with a print run of a thousand, and also appeared in the *Beehive* and the *Miner and Workman's Advocate* (Collins and Abramsky 1965: 44-55). The pamphlet 'Value, Price and Profit' which anticipated certain results of *Capital* in a popular form – outlining Marx's disagreement with the Owenite socialist John Weston's 'wages fund' theory (which denied that trades unions could raise the standard of living) – was first delivered as a paper to the General Council in 1865. Marx also wrote two much-read IWMA addresses, on the Franco-Prussian war and the Proclamation of the French Republic respectively. The English version of the first of these (it was also published in French and German) was issued in leaflet form with an initial print run of 1000, and a second edition of the same number was printed a month later. This Address was welcomed by, amongst others, John Stuart Mill who (without knowing who had authored it) declared himself 'highly pleased with the address. There is not one word in it that ought not to be there; it could not have been done with fewer words' (Mill 1991: 220). The International continued to campaign for recognition of the Republic, but Marx's most important contribution to the rapidly unfolding events – following the insurrection in Paris, the short life of the Commune, and its violent repression – was undoubtedly *The Civil War in France*. Published by the General Council in pamphlet form, the first edition (June 1871) of 1,000 copies quickly ran out, a second revised edition of 2,000 copies followed shortly after, and a third edition appeared in August. (Within months it had been translated into French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Flemish, Serbo-Croat, Danish, and Polish.) This defence of, and

obituary for, the Paris Commune is widely and rightly considered one of Marx's most important political works; he stresses the Commune's historical achievement – especially its anticipation of the political forms that a future socialist society might adopt – and attacks the atrocities of the Versaillese then beginning to come to light. (Estimates remain contested, but perhaps 20,000 communards were executed, some 7,500 jailed or deported, and many thousands fled abroad.)

These various political involvements also had their personal dimensions, and Marx's third 'exile' was neither as socially isolated nor as full of rancour as often portrayed (Cohen 1991: 120-121). By way of illustration, consider Marx's friendship with Edmund Spencer Beesly, a proponent of Auguste Comte's positivism, a professor of history at University College London, and (later) the founder of the *Positivist Review* (Harrison 1959; 1965: 269-277; 1967). The political gulf here should not be exaggerated, but Marx's hostility to Comte and positivism is well known. Nevertheless, Marx and Beesly, and their respective families, became good friends. It was probably Beesly's trade union connections that initially bought him to Marx's attention; Beesly was variously an honorary member of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, closely involved with the London Trades Council, and helped found the International (although he declined membership of the General Council). Marx sent Beesly a letter of support when the latter was subjected to fierce personal attacks in the press for his defence of trades unions in the aftermath of the 'Sheffield outrages' (Harrison 1959: 38-39). Marx subsequently accompanied Beesly to trade union meetings, recording, for instance, 'a really fine, very impudent speech' that Beesly gave at Exeter Hall in London (Marx and Engels 1988: 298). Marx was also impressed by Beesly's historical articles, in *The Westminster Review* and elsewhere, describing him as the only Comtist in England or France 'who deals with historical turning points (crises) not as a sectarian but as a historian in the best sense of the word' (Marx and Engels 1989: 150). Marx sent him the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 and later – and more helpfully, since Beesly did not read German – the French translation of *Capital* in fascicules as it was printed. They worked together on Beesly's authoritative history of the International in *The Fortnightly Review*, but their closest collaboration surrounded the Commune (Harrison 1981). They laboured tirelessly to help Communard refugees, organising emergency relief, and resisting demands for their extradition. Following Marx's death, in a letter to the *Christian Socialist*, Beesly (1884) acknowledged the 'wide gulf' between their views, but noted that 'Dr. Marx and I were always good friends; to the end of his life I had great esteem and regard for him: and I am sure that he considered me to be a well-meaning person' (adding, with an insight born of familiarity, that this was more than Marx was 'willing to allow with regard to most people who differed with him'). Marx was actually less stinting than this might suggest, having earlier recorded (to a German correspondent) that 'Professor Beesly is a Comtist and is as such obliged to support all sorts of crotchets, but for the rest a very capable and brave man' (Marx and Engels 1989: 92).

§ 4

Whilst casting doubt on certain familiar accounts of Marx's isolation from British culture and political life, I have thus far said rather little about his engagement with British *socialism*. The present section addresses this subject more directly.

Marx acknowledged the existence of a long and distinguished tradition of British socialism, although he often inaccurately labelled it 'English' (Marx and Engels 1976b: 461). In the mid-1840s, for example, he mocked Wilhelm Weitling for imagining that socialism was a contemporary French invention. Only a German, Marx remarked, could be so insular as not to have heard of Thomas More, the Levellers, Robert Owen, William Thompson, John Watts, George Jacob Holyoake, Julian Harney, John Minter Morgan, Charles Southwell, John Goodwyn Barmby, James Pierrepont Greaves, Thomas Rowe Edmonds, Joshua Hobson, and Thomas Spence (Marx and Engels 1976b: 461). There is scarcely room here to explore all of this interesting and disparate list (which includes at least one Irishman), but I will say something about Marx's view of Robert Owen. The latter seems a suitable case study, not only because of Owen's standing – 'the founder' of the modern socialist movement in Britain according to Engels (1975: 386) – but also because the connections here promise to illuminate the relation between Marxian and (certain) non-Marxian forms of socialism.

Marx admired Owen as a person, viewing him as a 'really reliable character', the kind who draws 'fresh strength' from any setback (Marx and Engels 1985: 114). This positive view is echoed in Engels' biographical sketch in *Anti-Dühring*, which begins with the familiar story of Owen's social experiment whilst manager, and part-owner, of the New Lanark Mill in Scotland; successfully transforming a 'demoralised' population into a 'model colony' by placing them in 'conditions worthy of human beings' (Engels 1987: 249) and attending to the education of the rising generation with an experimental infant school (see Leopold 2011). However, Owen's public prestige declined rapidly once he started to promote communitarian settlements based on common ownership, and openly proclaimed that religion, existing forms of marriage, and private property were the primary obstacles to social progress. Despite being banished from 'official society', and losing his fortune on unsuccessful communitarian experiments in America, Owen's commitment to working class interests is portrayed as unwavering. He remained convinced that as long as private property arrangements obtained, the benefits of increased productivity would be directed towards the proprietors, and away from improving the character and intellect of the class who produced the wealth. Engels' biographical account of Owen has its limitations; for example, the insistence on the impeccably communist character of his middle-period communitarianism is not wholly persuasive, and there is no mention of his later Spiritualist enthusiasms. However, it accurately reflects the broadly positive Marxian view of Owen's life and achievements. Owen's name is said to be linked with 'every real advance in England on behalf of the workers', including the first law limiting working hours for women and children, the first national association of Trade Unions, and the first wave of production and retail cooperatives (Engels 1987: 251-252).

Evidence of an interest in Owen can be found throughout Marx's adult life. Owen featured in one of Marx's earliest (subsequently aborted) projects, designed to educate German contemporaries about socialism in Britain and France. In the early 1840s, Marx and Engels – together with Moses Hess – planned to include Owen in the opening volumes of a series of foreign socialist writings in German translation, since his work was judged to be amongst those 'closest to our principles' (Marx and Engels 1982: 27). And as late as 1877, Marx was lending Owen texts to Engels for his work on *Anti-Dühring*. Among his Owen books not in storage, Marx possessed the 'very important' title *The Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race*, but

reported that his two volume *The Life of Robert Owen* was missing, with Charles Longuet (Marx's son-in-law) identified as the likely culprit (Marx and Engels 1991: 263). Engels himself once owned an extensive, even irreplaceable, collection of Owenite writings – assembled at the height of Engels' own youthful communitarian enthusiasms (see Leopold 2009; 2012) and before his partnership with Marx – which was subsequently lost in the upheavals of 1848-1849 (see Marx and Engels 1989: 477; 1995: 422).

Marx belonged to a much younger generation of socialists, and did not know Owen personally. However, he appears to have heard Owen speak on at least two occasions. He attended a lecture by Owen on the latter's eightieth birthday, reporting that 'despite his *idées fixes*, the old man was ironical and endearing' (Marx and Engels 1982: 360; see also Tsuzuki 1971: 32). These *idées fixes* are most probably the two central claims about human nature repeated endlessly in Owen's writings (and rejected by Marx): that individuals do not form their own character, rather their whole character is formed for them by circumstances; and that since individuals are not accountable for their own sentiments and habits, to imagine that they merit rewards for some actions and punishments for others is a fundamental mistake (see Owen 1993b: 33-35). Some three years later, Marx heard the elderly Owen intervene, at a meeting of the Society of Arts, to oppose the idea that philanthropy could solve the problems of class-divided society (Marx 1979a: 612).

Marx associates Owen with 'utopian socialism', indeed as belonging to that movement's founding triumvirate – alongside Charles Fourier and Henri Saint-Simon. What makes the socialism of Owen, and these others, *utopian* is a moot issue, but one factor is surely their conviction that constructing detailed designs for a future socialist society is a legitimate and necessary endeavour. This suggestion distinguishes utopian from Marxian socialism (see below), and is consistent with Marx's own association of utopianism with the drawing up of 'pictures and plans of a new society' (Marx 1986a: 499; Marx and Engels 1991: 284). Owen's inclusion in this company seems appropriate. For a large part of his life, Owen was an enthusiastic proponent of grand designs for communal living, advocating 'home colonies' – formed on the plan of a closed 'parallelogram', and containing no more than two thousand five hundred people living and working together – as both the means of transition to, and the final institutional form of, a socialist society (1993a: 337-407).

Marx's attitude towards utopian socialism is often misunderstood. The terms 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialism are not used by Marx in an exhaustive way, as if all socialisms have to be either one or the other. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, utopian socialism is portrayed as one of five extant strands of non-Marxian socialism (see Leopold *forthcoming*). In addition, it is a mistake to portray Marx as having an unremittingly negative attitude towards utopian socialism. It is easy to find textual examples of him praising, as well as criticising, utopian literature. However, that is not to imply that Marx is inconsistent, since there is an underlying structure here which renders his considered view of utopian socialism consistent (Leopold 2005).

That underlying structure can be discerned by attending to two distinctions. The first is a chronological distinction between the original generation of utopian socialists (dominated by the founding triumvirate to which Owen belongs), and subsequent generations, including the various followers of that original generation (not least, assorted Owenites). The second is a textual distinction between the 'critical'

dimension of utopian writings, concerned with detailing the faults of existing society, and their 'systematic' dimension, concerned with elaborating detailed designs for the ideal society of the future. The degree of Marx's approbation broadly tracks these two distinctions. He tends to be comparatively generous about the original utopians, and comparatively disdainful of their subsequent imitators. And he tends to be comparatively generous about the critical element of utopian writings, and comparatively disdainful of their systematic dimension. Marx's view of utopian socialism is thus not only consistent, but also more balanced, less one-sidedly hostile, than often portrayed.

In what follows, I elucidate the rationale behind these two distinctions, and show how Marx's assessment of Owen embodies this interpretative framework.

The chronological distinction helps makes sense of some apparently conflicting remarks about utopian socialism found in Marx's writings. For example, his praise of the utopians' imaginative portrayal of the socialist future is explicitly restricted to the founding triumvirate, and not extended to their 'philistine' successors (Marx and Engels 1987: 326). Whilst his condemnation of utopianism as 'silly, stale and thoroughly reactionary' explicitly refers not to 'the great French and English utopians' but only to their 'ineffectual' disciples (Marx and Engels 1991: 284). The rationale behind this chronological verdict – that the more recent the utopian author, the less meritorious their contribution – rests on a historical notion of culpability. Marx does not assume that the founding generation of utopians made fewer errors than their successors, about, for instance, the nature of, and transition to, socialism. Indeed, he thinks of both the original utopians and their later followers as holding broadly the same views. However, Marx argues that the intellectual formation of the founding generation took place in a historical context which inevitably limited their understanding in certain crucial respects. On the cusp of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, neither the objective conditions (economic productivity) nor the subjective conditions (proletarian agency) for socialism, were sufficiently developed for misunderstandings to be readily avoidable (see Marx 1986a: 499; Engels 1987: 245). These historical circumstances were sufficiently developed to provoke socialist criticism, but not sufficiently developed for that criticism to escape serious misunderstandings (Cohen 2000: 63). Consequently, the first generation of utopian socialists were not to blame for their relevant false beliefs because a correct understanding was not yet possible. The same historical excuse is clearly not available to their subsequent disciples and epigones who 'hold fast by the original view of their masters' despite significantly changed circumstances (Marx and Engels 1976a: 516). As a result, Marx is comparatively forgiving about Owen's erroneous views, and comparatively critical of later Owenites when they subscribe to those same views.

Examples of Owen's purportedly erroneous, and paradigmatically utopian, views – in this case, about the transition to socialism – can be found in the *Communist Manifesto*. Owen is associated: first, with an 'abstentionist' view of political action, criticising strikes and other activities associated with class struggle in particular (Marx and Engels 1976a: 515); second, with a view of the proletariat as a passive object (in need of rational reform), rather than a collective subject itself capable of 'historical initiative' (Marx and Engels 1976a: 515); and third, with a commitment to a communitarian strategy for the achievement of socialism, whereby 'home colonies' would gradually spread throughout society by the force of example alone (Marx and

Engels 1976a: 516). There is insufficient space here to assess Marx's claim about their erroneous character, but the ascription of these views to Owen is certainly plausible.

Yet Marx does not consider Owen culpable for these errors, because they were unavoidable given the latter's historical context. Marx suggests: first, that it was the undeveloped state of those formative circumstances which 'causes socialists of this [utopian – DL] kind to consider themselves superior to all class antagonisms' (Marx and Engels 1976a: 515); second, that in its 'historical infancy' the proletariat did, to all intents and purposes, appear as if it were a class incapable of independent action (Marx and Engels 1976a: 515); and third, that the inevitable failure of communitarian means – the corruption of small islands of socialism by their wider non-communitarian environment – only became obvious following the dramatic collapse of Owen's own communal experiments, including the 'long since defunct' Harmony settlement in Hampshire (Engels 1988: 348).

Owen may not be culpable for his erroneous views about the transition to socialism, but the same historical exemption is not extended to later Owenites. Consequently, Marx attacks John Francis Bray, 'one of Owen's disciples', for relapsing into the very same 'abstentionist' mistakes as his master, despite the fact that by 1839 – the year in which Bray's *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy* was published – working class struggles had developed a degree of independence and militancy that was unknown in the 'not sufficiently developed' historical circumstances faced by Owen himself (Marx 1988: 394).

(Of course, this is not – as Marx himself understood – the whole story about Owen's socialist followers. In addition to repeating some of Owen's mistakes, they also developed an interesting and important body of independent work in political economy (Claeys 1987: ch. 3-5). Some of these Owenite writings appear to fall foul of Marx's scepticism about theories of exploitation resting on 'unequal exchange', but he studied them carefully and his concept of 'surplus labour' may reflect their influence (King 1983). The Owenites in question – including, alongside Bray, John Gray, Thomas Hodgskin, and William Thompson – are traditionally called 'Ricardian socialists', a label which somewhat obscures their intellectual provenance.)

I turn now to the rationale behind the second distinction which structures Marx's considered view of utopian socialism. This textual distinction runs between the utopian plans for the ideal society, about which Marx is less enthusiastic, and the utopian critique of existing society, which he judges to be of considerable value. For example, in the *Communist Manifesto*, having disparaged their 'fantastic pictures of future society', Marx describes the critical elements of utopian writings, which 'attack every principle of existing society', as 'full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class' (Marx and Engels 1976a: 516).

The rationale here reveals an important and perplexing feature of Marx's thought. It is apparent that Owen subscribes to a plausible – but non-Marxian – view, according to which, in order to achieve their goals, socialists need to develop detailed and persuasive accounts not only of the failings of contemporary society, but also of the institutions and ethos of any future socialist society. Marx rejects the second part of this plausible view, and denies that socialists should devote time and thought to questions of socialist design (see 1987a: 17). The issues here are complex, but three kinds of argument against the need for detailed and persuasive accounts of future

socialist society can be found in Marx's writings. Very briefly, Marx argues: first, that utopian plans foreclose the future in a way that is undemocratic; second, that utopian plans presuppose a degree of predictive accuracy that is unobtainable; and third, that utopian plans are redundant because optimal solutions to the social and political problems of humankind are immanent in the historical process. In the obstetric language by which Marx is often tempted, socialists should aim to play the role of the midwives of history, not *designing* solutions for a future socialist society, but rather *delivering* the 'elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant' (Marx 1986b: 335). Whatever the plausibility of this position – and I do not mean to endorse these Marxian claims here – it is apparent that Marx does not primarily criticise utopian socialists for the inadequate and implausible content of their 'blueprints' for the socialist future; he criticises them for supposing that we need 'blueprints' at all. As a result, Marx is comparatively enthusiastic about Owen's criticisms of existing capitalist arrangements, and comparatively unenthusiastic about Owen's portraits of future socialist society.

Owen's account of existing social arrangements contains a 'critical element' of great value for contemporary socialists. Marx is obviously sympathetic to Owen's identification of private property as an obstacle blocking the path to social progress. Owen criticised contemporary economic competition, not least for encouraging the 'most inferior feelings, the meanest faculties, the worse passions, and the most injurious vices' (1991: 358). Marx is also interested in Owen's discussion of the character of work in capitalist society, a discussion with obvious connections to his own account of alienation (see Leopold 2007: 223-245). In the so-called *Grundrisse* – a kind of rough draft of the project that would become *Capital* – Marx (1987b: 99) excerpts several passages in which Owen portrays workers as robbed of their health by both the monotony and exhaustion of contemporary work, and the desperation and intemperance of their snatched moments of leisure. Marx also approvingly quotes Owen on the instrumental treatment of human beings in capitalism; Owen observes that workers are treated not merely as if they were machines, but more precisely as if they were 'secondary and inferior' machines – since capitalists typically devote much less attention to the perfection of the bodies and minds of the immediate producers than to the refinement of the wood and metals of their inanimate counterparts (see Marx 1987a: 406; 1987b: 97). That Owen was himself once a manufacturer would seem to lend these claims an additional authority.

For the reasons sketched above, Marx (1987a: 17) holds that socialists should refrain from writing what he calls recipes 'for the cookshops of the future'. Nonetheless he does identify some value in Owen's vision of socialism, his contribution to 'the presentiment and visionary expression of a new world' (Marx and Engels 1987: 326). For example, Owen is credited with having recognised the need to overcome the developing 'antithesis between town and country' to which capitalist development gives rise (Engels 1987: 278). In addition, and perhaps more strikingly – since it involves a rare example of Marx speculating on the detailed content of the socialist future – Owen's experimental school in New Lanark is said to have revealed 'the germ of the education of the future', in its adumbration of an education which combines instruction, physical exercise, and, for older children, some limited participation in the world of work (Marx 1987a: 486). That said, Marx and Engels are unenthusiastic about the dry and business-like prose in which Owen elaborated his vision of the socialist future, with none of the poetry and imagination found, for instance, in Fourier's work. As Engels (1975: 386) quips: Owen was too often

inclined to write 'like a German Philosopher', which is to say he was inclined to write 'very badly'.

The structure provided by Marx's considered account of utopian socialism does not exhaust his assessment of Owen's importance. Two 'supplementary' elements of that assessment might be mentioned here.

In *The Holy Family*, Marx maintains that Owen plays a significant role in the history of 'materialism'. Marx's own 'metaphysical' and 'epistemological' commitments are not usually of great philosophical interest, except insofar as they appear to bear on his social and political philosophy. However, in that context, it is striking that, in some suggestive but frustratingly brief remarks, Marx seeks to draw a connection between the standpoint of socialism and a view of scientific knowledge as drawn 'from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it'. He sketches an opaque conceptual affinity between certain forms of British socialism, which seek to make the environment more 'human', and a certain type of French 'materialism', which emphasises the impact of the environment in shaping human beings (Marx and Engels 1975: 130-131). This conceptual affinity, he continues, is reflected in the history of philosophy. More precisely, it is reflected in the impact of Helvétius (French materialism), through the mediating influence of Jeremy Bentham, on Owen (British Socialism).

In the 'Inaugural Address', Marx also insists that Owen has a significant place in the history of the co-operative movement. Marx's view of the latter is complex. He does not think that socialism could come about as a result of the gradual spread of producers' cooperatives, and he maintains that the latter will always play a marginal role in capitalist economies. However, he also insists that 'these great social experiments' are of considerable value. In particular, he suggests that by 'deed' rather than 'argument' they have demonstrated that productivity is not dependent on class-division, 'that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands' (Marx 1985: 11). The crucial nature of this result for Marx's own vision of socialism will be apparent. Nor is he in any doubt about the historical origins of this momentous experiment; 'the seeds of the co-operative system', Marx insists, 'were sown by Robert Owen' (Marx 1985: 11).

Marx sometimes illustrates his understanding of the relation between utopian and Marxian socialism with the analogy of the relation between alchemy and modern chemistry. This analogy helpfully clarifies that what we have here – since modern chemistry evolved out of alchemy – is a relation not only of conceptual affinity (between elements of utopian and Marxian socialism) but also of historical development (from utopian to Marxian socialism). Utopian socialism, Marx writes, 'bore within itself the seeds of [literally 'contained it *in nuce*' — DL] critical and materialist socialism' (Marx and Engels 1991: 284). This important developmental claim was also evident in the original title of Engels' famous pamphlet *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*, but lost in its now traditional English translation as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. The analogy also suggests that Marxian socialists should respect their utopian forebears. As Marx insists: 'we cannot repudiate these patriarchs of socialism [the original utopians — DL], just as chemists cannot repudiate their forebears the alchemists' (1988: 394). Without repeating their errors, Marx always defended the first generation of utopians against those who

would disparage them. For example, he once explained the highly polemical tone of his earlier attack on Proudhon as a reaction (in part) to the 'coarse insults' that the latter had heaped on the utopians, a group of writers whom Marx himself had rightly 'honoured' as the forebears of modern socialism (Marx 1989: 326). A remark by Engels (1989: 459) happily captures both the attitudinal and developmental aspects of the relationship here: 'We German socialists', he writes, 'are proud of the fact that we are descended … from … Owen'.

§ 5

Finally, I offer some observations about the influence of Marx's ideas on British socialism in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Since this is a less neglected topic in the literature (see Pierson 1973; Bevir 2011), and mainly takes place after Marx's death in 1883, my comments here will be brief.

There is something of a consensus in the literature about where to begin and what to include in accounts of the first posthumous generation of Marxian-influenced socialists in Britain. These accounts usually begin in the early 1880s – a period of remarkable organisational growth for European socialism – and are dominated by three figures and two organisations. Henry Mayers Hyndman is a striking character with impeccable establishment credentials, whose frock coat and top hat were far from the only things – his conservatism, enthusiasm for Empire, and anti-Semitism might also be mentioned – that made him the unlikely founder of what historians have seen as 'the first modern socialist organisation of national importance in Britain' (Hobsbawm 1964b: 231). Ernest Belfort Bax is a more cerebral character (Cowley 1992), an intellectual with serious interests in German philosophy, whose engagement with socialist politics was hampered by his overly academic manner and often idiosyncratic views – of which his purportedly 'egalitarian' opposition to women's suffrage is the most glaring example (see Bax 1906: 265-319; Hunt 1996: 57-63). William Morris, the third of these figures is, of course, much better known, but not always thought of in this particular context. Indeed, it can often seem that Morris's achievements as a designer and poet have obscured his considerable stature as a socialist thinker. The two organisations in question are the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League. The SDF was founded (initially as the Democratic Federation) in 1880, and has a lengthy and complex organisational history connecting it to both the Labour Party and the Communist Party in Britain (Crick 1994). In the 1880s it was essentially a sect which split in two, giving birth to the Socialist League in 1884. That schism reflected disputes about external politics (especially the SDF's hostility to trade unionism and enthusiasm for parliamentary elections) and internal structure (especially Hyndman's dominant role within the organisation). Those who left (encouraged by Engels) included Morris and Bax, yet within five years the League had collapsed under the pressure of destructive internal disputes about revolutionary 'purism' and anarchism.

There is much less of a consensus in the literature about the degree and manner in which these figures and organisations were shaped by Marx's thought. Their 'orthodoxy' in this regard might not be the only, or indeed the most interesting, question about their work and influence, but it is clearly a pertinent concern in the present context.

Hyndman perhaps looks the least likely to have been significantly influenced by Marx's writings. He thought of Marx's contribution to socialism as an essentially economic one, yet his understanding of that narrowly economic theory appears limited. Not least, Hyndman seems to have retained some commitment to the 'wages fund' theory (see above) which Marx had argued against. In 1881, Hyndman had drawn freely on *Capital* for two of the chapters of *England for All* but referred only to an unnamed 'great thinker and original writer' as one of his sources (1881: vi). That Marx was both a Jew and a German seems to have made Hyndman hesitate to name either him or his work explicitly (Tsuzuki 1961: ch. 3, Bax 1918: 53). Marx's consequent irritation was both predictable and justified (Marx and Engels 1992: 102-3, 162). Hyndman's wider political ambitions involved hitching Marx's economic analysis to what, at one point, Hyndman himself (1911: 282) refers to as 'a more immediate policy of my own'. Hyndman's diagnosis of social ills often articulated the concern of Tory radicalism that modernity had corroded previous systems of order and leadership without effecting their replacement (Bevir 2011: 66-70). Moreover, that Hyndman's socialism had a national focus and a commitment to state-centric and imperial solutions, also makes it hard to square with Marx's own views.

Bax (1881) wrote an article about Marx's life and ideas as part of the 'Leaders of Modern Thought' series in *Modern Thought* (he also contributed pieces on Schopenhauer and Wagner for the same series). Marx himself placed the article in the context of British critics beginning to take notice of *Capital*, linking Bax's article with Hyndman's *England for All* and what he saw as a rather condescending piece in *The Contemporary Review* by John Rae (1881). Bax's article was judged 'wrong and confused' in places, and the translations he had included were weak, but Marx welcomed the young man's enthusiasm for his economic ideas, and for the achievement of *Capital* in particular (Marx and Engels 1992: 162-163, 184-185). (Marx was especially pleased that this public recognition had cheered his wife – who was also mentioned in the biographical part of the article – in the last few days of her life.) Bax identified Marx's achievement with his contribution to economic theory, rather than to the political and religious dimensions of socialism, which, on Bax's own account, should consist of 'international Republicanism' and 'atheistic humanism', respectively (1887: 81). More generally, Bax thought of modern socialism as needing to be supplemented by an idealist metaphysics of his own development (although owing something to Schopenhauer and von Hartmann), and the philosophy of history to which it gave rise (in which the 'logical' and 'a-logical' fought for dominance). Engels would archly suggest that Bax had only ever half-digested the German philosophy to which he was so inexorably drawn (Marx and Engels 2001: 78).

Of these three, Morris is the only theorist of originality and stature whose work has significant affinities with Marx. It might be thought that such a suggestion is undermined by Morris's utopian enthusiasms, given the Marxian rejection of the need to engage in socialist design (outlined above). However, there are some striking structural affinities between Morris's utopian novel *News From Nowhere*, and Marx's own vision of socialism. For example, 'Nowhere' has finally overcome the divide between town and country, and – perhaps more significantly – its development appears to have followed the two historical stages outlined by Marx, and organised according to the contribution principle ('from each according to his abilities, to each according to his work'), and the needs principle ('from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'), respectively (Meier 1978: 201-394). This is not, of

course, to deny the existence of important differences; for example, the revival of craft labour, the marginalisation of science, and the static productivity of Morris's utopia would seem to represent points of disagreement with Marx (Morris 2003). In addition, deciding whether Morris's work was influenced by, or merely shared an affinity with, Marx's writings, is extraordinarily difficult. In some cases, it appears that Morris's ideas – for instance, his insistence on both the degraded character of work in contemporary capitalism, and the importance of self-realisation in work to the good society of the future – cannot reflect his serious engagement with Marx's writings because they predate it.

These three individuals and two organisations form the standard reference points in discussions of Marx's posthumous impact on nineteenth-century British socialism. However, those discussions are not always without their limitations.

First, influence can be negative as well as positive, and a satisfactory account of Marx's complex relationship with British socialism would have to include something on socialist critics of Marxian ideas. In the late nineteenth century these critics focused their attention on Marx's economic thought (Hobsbawm 1964a; Willis 1977). That critical reaction intensified after the appearance of the English translation of *Capital* in 1887, but had begun much earlier; the Christian Socialist J.M. Ludlow, for example, had discussed Marx's economic ideas in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1869. Fabian socialism is perhaps the central example of a socialism which is widely and rightly thought of as non-Marxian, but whose character was shaped by its interaction with Marx's ideas. There are some positive affinities here; for example, some Fabian claims about historical tendencies within capitalism have a close resemblance to Marx's own views (McBriar 1962: 62-63). More importantly, even those parts of Fabian doctrine most opposed to Marxian thought sometimes bear the latter's impress. Fabian theories of rent, for example, not only emerged out of critical discussions of Marx's labour theory of value, but were also intended to maintain some of the conclusions of his account of exploitation, not least, that 'injustice' remains even in an ideally functioning capitalist society (McBriar 1962: 29-59).

In addition, an inadequate understanding of Marx's interaction with British politics and culture during his lifetime, can distort accounts of this later period. Some of the literature is guilty of treating Marx's thought as a 'continental' import which was only released into the 'indigenous' intellectual environment in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The implicit suggestion is that we can examine the relationship between Marx and British socialism, in much the same way that naturalists might study the destructive, or other, impact of the (Chinese) Muntjack deer, or the (American) Signal Crayfish on the indigenous flora and fauna. I have tried to suggest above that this is a misleading framework to adopt, showing not only that Marx's own work was engaged with, and influenced by, British politics and culture, but also that his ideas had escaped into that wider environment well before the 1880s. The availability of Marx's writings in Britain during his lifetime was certainly restricted, but it was much more extensive than is often believed. That said, particular areas of Marx's thought are underrepresented in those published writings, and many of the latter appeared in radical periodicals and pamphlets that quickly became inaccessible (see Marx and Engels 1995: 422).

In short, accounts of the posthumous impact of Marx's ideas on late nineteenth-century British socialism need to recognise that his own earlier engagement with

British culture was serious, sustained, and significant. From amongst its various threads – economic, literary, and so on – I have concentrated here on some of its neglected political dimensions, including Marx's appreciation of the distinguished tradition of socialism in Britain.

Marx's assessment of Robert Owen – detailed above and summarised here – not only confirms that claim, but also illuminates the complex relationship between Marxian and utopian socialism. Despite his rejection of utopian 'blueprints', Marx approved of certain elements in Owen's vision of socialism (including his attempts to educate the young, and to overcome the division between town and country). More emphatically, Marx thought that Owen's assessment of contemporary society was full of valuable critical materials (including his appreciation of the degraded character of work under capitalism, and his understanding of the centrality of private property as a cause of these and other social problems). Marx did think that some of Owen's views, especially about the transition to socialism (the marginal role of the proletariat and the importance of communitarian experiments, for example), were flawed, but he excused Owen of responsibility for these mistaken views since they were unavoidable in the undeveloped historical circumstances in which the latter's intellectual formation had taken place. And finally, Marx allocated Owen a significant place in both the history of 'materialism' (with which socialism had an affinity), and the history of the co-operative movement (which offered a practical demonstration that productivity does not require class division). This sympathetic and generous assessment reflects a lifelong engagement with British socialism, and is hard to square with claims in the literature about 'Marx's low esteem for Robert Owen' (Hasselmann 1971: 288). Not least, Owen was acknowledged and honoured as a distinguished representative of the utopian socialist tradition from which Marx's own views had developed, and from which, he maintained, we could still learn.

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